

# They Stayed Behind

## *Voices of Croatian Women in the Karlovac Area during Serbian Occupation—1991-1995*

BY MARY VALENTICH

*En se basant sur des lettres et des communications personnelles, l'auteure se demande pourquoi les Croatiennes n'ont pas voulu quitter les villages occupés et comment elles ont survécu à plusieurs années de misère et à l'angoisse de savoir leurs parents à Karlovac, à la fois si proches, et si démunis.*

Between July and December 1991, JNA (Jugoslav National Army) and Serbian paramilitary forces, working in close cooperation, consolidated their control over almost one-third of the Croatian state's territory in bitter warfare that resulted in high military and civilian casualties (over 10,000 people killed and approximately 30,000 wounded), savage atrocities, the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of people, and the widespread destruction of property and historic monuments. (Cohen 225)

...Where does one begin? In 1965 when I first visited those villages with the exotic names that I had heard since childhood from my mother and father?<sup>1</sup> I knew those villages well by June 1991, the last time I walked with abandon on pathways through the fields, along flowered roadsides, and on sandy river beaches. In the fall of 1991, I received a letter from a cousin, a teacher of history and geography, who had taught for over 20 years in one of those villages. She wrote that she was now a refugee, along with other members of her immediate family, driven from their home by the Yugoslav National Army and Serb paramilitaries.<sup>2</sup> Homes were being vandalized, everything of value was hauled away, the church was badly damaged, and records were obliterated. Without records of births and property, the Serbs could declare that no Croats had ever lived there. This was genocide, she declared. Who could believe this was happening in 1991?

Her anguished cry ushered in for me nearly seven years of numbness: I could write letters to politicians, go to lectures on the former Yugoslavia as it became known during its disintegration after Communism fell (Cohen), and join in relief efforts from my safe perch in Canada. I received other letters from relatives, but they were less frequent than before the war years and they were mostly letters of pain, telling me about their not knowing about the health or state of those relatives, mostly their elderly mothers—my aunts who had stayed behind in those villages. In the fall of 1991, when the JNA invaded Croatia and occupied territory, almost reaching Karlovac, most of

the Croatians in the neighbouring villages who were “younger,” that is, in their 50s or 60s, left. They gathered up what they could in bag or suitcase and ran at night, from village to village, until they could find a way to cross the river and make their way to safety. A few of my cousins managed to leave on the last rowboats that left one night; the next day all remaining boats were burned by the occupiers.

The occupation of the region that Serbs now refer to as *krajina* or border region lasted from 1991 to 1995. One of my cousins detailed this period in her diary as 1,300 days of occupation. My elderly relatives and a few younger ones remained in the sparsely-settled villages. They were hostages, at the mercy of their captors. Why they stayed behind, how they survived, and how they and their families—only 20 minutes away by car to Karlovac—endured the separation is the subject of this article.

The article is based on my analysis of letters I received from relatives in Karlovac about those who stayed behind. These same relatives have shared with me some letters they received from their mothers during the period of occupation. I have also had access to excerpts of the above-mentioned diary. In 1998, I finally returned to Croatia and conversed with those who had returned to the villages, if only on weekends, to begin the long process of restoration of houses and farms. I have also reviewed literature such as testimonies of other Croatian refugees within Croatia (Fulgosi and Vince-Ribaric) and newspaper accounts relating to the region. Regrettably, seven of my aunts who had stayed in the villages died within a two-year period after liberation of the area by the Croatian Army in August, 1995. These stalwart women had, however, achieved their goal of protecting their homes. They had endured threats, beatings, vandalization of their homes and property, cold, hunger, lack of electricity, proper food, and medicine. They had survived for over four years without those whom they loved most—their adult children and grandchildren. Their stand, in my view, their resistance, can all too quickly be forgotten. These indi-

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Church of St. Rok, under restoration, 1998.

viduals did not seek glory, but their steadfastness and endurance is a legacy for all persons and warrants recognition.

#### Why did they stay?

There is no one answer, but to appreciate the possible answers, it is important to understand the villages and the way of life of the people living there. I imagine that the vil-

lage my father left in 1925, and the one my mother left in 1939 to join him in an arranged marriage, were rather similar. The houses were large, two-storied affairs with animals on the lower level, in stables and barns adjoining the main structure. An extended family unit or *zadruga* with perhaps 20 or more members lived in the house (St. Erlich) and shared the work of farming. By 1965—my first visit back—only a few of these big houses were still standing. Most were smaller wooden structures housing nuclear family units. In my mother's village, only one family had running water in the house; others drew water from wells. Most had electricity which typically failed during the supper hour. There were a few tractors and the occasional car. Mostly we travelled by horse-drawn wagon when we visited, although the train connection to Karlovac was very good. The children went to a local school, but in my mother's village, there was one university graduate by the 1950s, and he encouraged two younger relatives to gain their university degrees.

By the 1970s, it was not uncommon for one person, usually a man, to be employed in Germany as a guest worker. One of my cousins travelled each weekend by bus from Stuttgart on Friday to his village home and back again on Sunday. He did this for over 16 years. On the weekend he would return to Karlovac to buy supplies needed for the house he was rebuilding in the village. In another village, an aunt in her 50s, headed off to work in a tuberculosis sanitarium in Germany, much to the dismay of her husband and other family members. Her labours of over 15 years combined with those of her son earned a renovated house, an array of farm machinery, and monies toward the purchase of apartments in Karlovac for her grandchildren.

The sacrifices of these individuals to improve the well-being of their families were not unusual. By the 1980s,

there was a measure of prosperity evident in these villages. Many of the small wooden traditional houses had given way to white stucco two-story structures, with barns attached. Farm machinery had replaced the horses and wagons. Some villages fared better with respect to running water and indoor plumbing than others. Electricity became reliable and televisions brought the world to their hearths. Some villages remained without telephones until the late 1990s, but there were better roads and cars and buses began to roar through the villages. Despite unresolved political tensions relating to life in a Communist regime where Croats did not feel "in charge" of their own affairs, there was an overall sense of progress and societal modernization.

Perhaps the slow but steady improvement in their lifestyles initially kept them from believing the unimaginable summarized by Hughes and Mlajenovic as follows:

In June 1991 Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from Yugoslavia; Bosnia-Herzegovina followed in April 1992. The Yugoslav National Army, controlled by the Serbs, intervened to stop these moves for independence. As Yugoslavia divided, nationalists formed paramilitary groups and fought to control their geographic regions. Serb military groups—the official army and paramilitaries—possessed greater arms and supplies that enabled them to initiate "ethnic cleansing," a genocidal campaign of forced removal, rape, and murder against civilian populations. (95)

Within this context, individuals made decisions to flee their villages or to stay.

One cousin wrote that prior to the war she, like her peers, had lived hedonistically, thinking of her own comforts. When the war was imminent, she was surprised, curious. Her parents were 84 and 87 years old; they decided to stay in their home. Not thinking of herself, her job, or her future, she decided to stay as well. She loved her parents and did not feel her decision was a sacrifice. She writes that their resolution not to leave their home made her very happy as her roots were in that village. Ultimately, however, two-thirds of the people escaped the village, leaving behind the elderly, a few middle-aged couples, and my cousin, in her late 40s.

When the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) and the Serbs came in the fall of 1991, apart from utter disbelief that danger, even death awaited them, some persons found themselves almost physically unable to separate themselves from their homes. The older ones had never lived elsewhere and had no desire to start anew. Their unwillingness to go reflected their rootedness in their home and fields. They had given their "everything" to make the land yield its harvest and they had spent enormous chunks of their adult lives to secure and develop these homes so that they and their children could live comfortably.<sup>3</sup> They felt

that they could not abandon their life's work simply because of the threat of marauders. They believed it was worth fighting for what they had worked so hard to achieve, and that if they lost their homes, it would be tantamount to losing their own lives.<sup>4</sup>

For the adult children, it was incredibly painful to leave their elderly mothers behind. Some of these women were not physically in the best of health. In their 70s and 80s, most of them could only manage a limited range of domestic and farm tasks. Yet the women urged younger relatives to leave and to leave quickly. Without telephones it was difficult to know where the invaders were and how much time was left.

One day the flow of cars stopped and the enemy occupied their village. How much opportunity did they have to buoy their courage before they faced the invaders? I do not know. I can, however, give some sense of their lives during the period from September 1991 to August 1995.

### Daily life during the occupation years

Initially, those who stayed behind didn't know what to expect. They were restricted to their homes after 7:00pm and they were forced to wear white arm bands to designate them as Croats. The occupiers stole their household goods and farm equipment, and threatened them. If the villagers protested, they were beaten. It mattered little whether you were male or female. My cousins report that their frail mother was pushed to the ground in a confrontation in her yard. Another aunt protested the removal of the roof of her daughter's weekend home and was urged to come inside the house to make her point. Her fear kept her on the road; she did not want to risk being killed inside the house, away from the eyes of neighbours who stood watching from their yards but dared not offer any help. Tension and the possibility of escalating violence was continuously present.

This sense of foreboding was particularly evident prior to the onset of the UNPROFOR period in February 1992. There was some easing of tension when UN soldiers were in the region making periodic checks of the residents. Because of her language skills, one of my cousins became a useful resource person for the UN soldiers from various countries; a Canadian peacekeeper even sent some of her letters to his family in Canada who subsequently delivered them to another cousin living in Canada. But UNPROFOR was not omnipresent and even when they were visible, their hands were tied (Van Atta). The JNA and the Serbs were able, at any time, to terrorize the residents.

It is important to note, however, that in the earlier period of occupation some of the local Serbs helped their Croatian neighbours, primarily with food. Later, it became too dangerous for them to provide such assistance. In 1998 one of my cousins showed me a balcony where a Serbian man and his son had been hung, just before the JNA and other Serbs had fled before the arrival of the Croatian Army. According to the villagers, their "crime" had been

that they had known too much about the wrongdoings of the occupiers. Their bodies have not yet been found.

The elderly lived in fear, wondering what each day would bring. The days were long, but they busied themselves with tasks. For food, they relied on what they had stored or what they could scrounge from the gardens in their yards. Perhaps there were some fruit trees or some vegetables that had grown. Each house had some chickens and at least, one cow. These animals had always been integral to village life; now they even became companions in prison. After UNPROFOR's arrival, letters could occasionally be sent to the families outside the occupied region, but these were subject to censure and the women never knew if the letters were actually mailed. Women learned to write restrained letters that attempted to reassure their loved ones they were reasonably well. In the letters available to me, these women focused for the most part on the welfare and lives of their daughters and grandchildren, urging the latter to do well in school, enjoy their activities, listen to their parents, and act responsibly.

In addition to lack of proper food, medicine was also initially unavailable. One cousin writes of the triumph of finding a bit of medicine for her elderly father. After UNPROFOR came, some medicine reached them through the Red Cross as well as in parcels from relatives, but medical care was lacking. On occasion, an elderly person who became quite ill was permitted to leave the village. One aunt and her daughter in her 50s told me that they decided to leave when the opportunity arose. They had survived over a year and their home was still standing, but they were worn out from the stress and they could barely live on what little food they could find. For a while, a *kum* or godparent helped them with any supplies he could sneak to them. But it became too dangerous for him, a Serb, to continue to do this. When they left, their home became a soldiers' barracks and, in effect, was destroyed. By 1998, they had rebuilt, but my aunt died in 1997 and never saw her new home.

Undoubtedly, there were some moments of laughter and even peace. One cousin describes the first day of the 1992 New Year, when she prepared some simple cakes of flour, water, and salt for her bedridden father and arthritic mother. She had found a little packet of coffee hidden in the cupboard of an abandoned house and there was even a little *rakija* or whiskey. Two elderly neighbours, well-scrubbed for holiday visiting, shared in this little feast, listening to Cardinal Kuharic in Zagreb, less than two hours away by bus, but totally inaccessible to them except via a treasured transistor. For a short period, there was a respite from the weariness of constant watchfulness.

This particular cousin came to play an important role in stabilizing the lives of the approximately 50 persons who had stayed behind in my mother's village. She had been living elsewhere, but with the outbreak of war decided that it would be better to die in her village than flee. She was skilled in several languages, and provided translation

services for the UNPROFOR soldiers. But her insider knowledge of the situation also made it dangerous for her. In one incident, she confronted a Serbian soldier who held a knife to her throat. Without hesitation, she dared him to cut her throat. She was sick of them! "Do it!" she cried. Who knows if her outburst scared him off or whether he decided it might be unwise to proceed. Those to whom I spoke credit her courage and her uplifting conversations with them as enabling them to stay and to resist.

But what of those who had left the villages? What did they think and feel during these years of occupation?

### Life in Karlovac

The city of Karlovac is where most of my relatives either lived previously or where they lived as refugees when they were driven from the nearby villages. The initial separation from their mothers and families was wrenching: one cousin writes that she last saw her mother on Sept. 21, 1991 standing by the *suma*, or forest, waving goodbye. Until February, 1992, they had no news of their mothers or of the other villagers. In Karlovac, horrible rumours spread about those who stayed behind. Those in Karlovac sought solace by gazing through binoculars from a neighbouring village on their side of the river at the smoke rising from the chimneys of the nearby villages. Letters arrived periodically but they knew the letters were censored and were therefore, uncertain about the actual conditions in which their families in the villages lived. Their pent-up rage and despair at their own powerlessness—except for being able to send the occasional food or medicine package—overwhelmed them. To spare me undue suffering, my cousins in Karlovac never sent me until 1998, a letter their mother had written me in January 1995. Knowing their own level of stress, they feared that I would be too upset. I think now of my aunt deciding on a winter's day, possibly to ease her own boredom and despair, to reach out for me. By the time I responded, it was too late for her to hear.

Even after liberation in 1995, I did not immediately phone Karlovac. Something within me had died and I could not deal with the horror of their situation. I wondered how those physically and psychologically nearer to the devastation dealt with the trauma of not knowing whether their mothers were alive or dead as well as their own helplessness to change the situation.

During this period, the people in Karlovac lived with the periodic raining down of grenades or mortars which necessitated long hours in basements with crying, hungry children. They speak of those days and nights with a grimness that comes from knowing by personal experience the worst of times. Their psychological health deteriorated, some more than others. Afterwards, they showed me the holes in the walls of the apartment where they lived; in effect, demonstrating how close they came to their own demise. But the Croatian Army fought back and

the citizens of Karlovac found themselves running for shelters when they heard the sirens, hoping that someone was leading their children to a shelter as well. Often, they found themselves running along the streets, pulling their children along, knowing that their *Chetniks*—the local Serbs who had stayed in the city—were likely the snipers shooting at them. For months at a time, this was daily life in Karlovac.

No one knew how long this period would last. These people were trapped in a militarized zone where the fighting continued during these years and prevented the passage of people from one side to the other. One aunt writes wistfully of not being able to spend time with her most loved grandchildren; and how precious years were slipping past. Yet she apparently believed that the occupation would come to an end and this belief may have been necessary for her survival. Her daughter in Karlovac said, as the months went by, she lost all hope.

Liberation finally came through a military action known as Operation Storm. Some male cousins had been serving in the Croatian Army during this entire period; others were called up in the late summer of 1995. One cousin writes that people in Karlovac knew something was about to happen and many had gone elsewhere, leaving the city strangely deserted. The tension was palpable. One of my cousins received a brief, impassioned telephone call from her husband on August 8, 1995, urging her to leave Karlovac immediately. She got things ready that night and around 5:20am, stuffed everything into the car and, with the children, drove to another cousin's home about 20 km outside Karlovac and toward Slovenia, away from the danger zone. As she left the city, the grenades were already beginning to fall. She drove fast and made it to her destination where she stayed for the four days of Operation Storm. All the while, they could hear the grenades falling on Karlovac. She knew nothing of her husband or brother except where they had been posted in the war zone. She was full of fear because the area to be liberated was large, the Serbs had a strong military post in the region, and she knew the Croatian Army would not give up.

The Croatian Army routed the various Serbian forces and Serbs began to flee from the region. My cousin returned to Karlovac and learned of the heavy fighting in the area and the loss of lives in battle. Within a few days, another cousin, taking a roundabout route to avoid the mined roads, returned to his village and found his mother and 95-year-old aunt alive but unwell. Their house had been hit during the liberation when a grenade had fallen in their front garden; fortunately, the two elderly women were in the kitchen at the back of the house when the grenade hit. Down the road, a daughter of one of these women, was joyfully reunited with her husband and son. That first night, as she slept with her husband after being separated for the four years of occupation, she suffered a stroke. "She made a noise in her throat," her husband said,

"I turned to her and said, 'what's wrong?' She shuddered and died."

In the following weeks, my cousins returned to their villages; all had similar reactions. They were overwhelmed at what they saw as they drove through the countryside. Some of the villages were veritable graveyards. Most of the local Serbs had fled, fearing reprisals by the Croats. The grass, over two metres high, had taken over the fertile fields that had not been tended during those four years. It was a wasteland. They approached with trepidation, seeing one vandalized and damaged Croatian house after another. The local church which had survived World War II was barely standing. Some knew that the tile roofs of their deserted houses would be gone, but they were not prepared for the devastation inside: the moss growing, the plaster destroyed, the hard-won appliances, tubs, and toilets ripped from the walls. All that remained of some houses was simply a burned heap of rubble. My cousins report that the people they found in the villages were as devastated as their surroundings. All they could do in those first few days of reunion was to cry.

Regrettably, none of my seven aunts, lived to see the rebuilding, and even the healing, which has begun. They died, one after the other, like tall trees falling in a deathly forest. They were old, ranging in age from the late-70s to 95. But how often do so many of one's relatives die in such a short time period? Having achieved their goal of returning home, perhaps they were ready to die, but they had been badly short-changed with respect to the usual joys of this stage of life.

## Conclusion

By 1998 the villages were coming to life. But like patients who have been hospitalized for long periods without proper nourishment, they were sorry characters, like ghosts from another era. The familiar spots were visible, but one knew not to stroll down to the river or to wander in the shady woods. Yellow tape marked some of the zones where mines had been placed. People looked much older than their years and cried easily when some conversations began. They showed me their renovations and the gardens they were once again planting. I was unable to visit some of my relatives because it was still too difficult to access transportation to the more distant villages. So much in terms of human life, endeavor, and spirit had been destroyed. At least three generations, in my view, have been so severely traumatized that their joy and laughter will always be edged with sadness. Perhaps the children, the fourth generation, may escape some of the bitterness that is understandable among those who have suffered incredible losses. As Jones notes, dealing with such losses is not simply a matter for psychotherapy: "For the refugees, the quest for justice will be more important than an army of psychological workers" (A9).

Justice is beyond the scope of this article, but I believe

it is important to recognize the lives of those heroic women who stayed behind, not to destroy the enemy, but to protect their own hearth. In their honour, those who are returning to the villages can rebuild, not only the physical structures, but the social, economic, and political ties to break the cycle of violence in their own midst.

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<sup>1</sup>Based on my lingering fears from the Communist era as well as the recent war, I have chosen not to use the real names of the villages or my relatives who provided me with information about their experiences during the period between 1991 and 1995.

<sup>2</sup>By June 1991, one of my cousins, a career soldier, had gone on an extended vacation from the Yugoslav National Army, recognizing that his days were numbered if he stayed. By 1992, the armed forces were comprised mostly of Serbians and Montenegrins. For further information, see Cohen (254). Cohen also notes that James Gow has provided a useful inventory of paramilitary forces involved in the war in Croatia, including the Serbian Guard, the Serbian Volunteer Guard, the Serbian Chetnik Movement, among others. For purposes of this article, I will use terms provided by the women and their relatives.

<sup>3</sup>A 14-year-old cousin visiting us in Canada asked how long it had taken us to build our house which she greatly admired. I replied six months. She was dumbfounded: "It's taken us eleven years!"

<sup>4</sup>In commenting on the more recent losses of homes in the Kosovo crisis, Jones notes that people need to understand what losing a home is like for an Albanian family: "Devastating is not the right word. It's a catastrophe" (A9).

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